

**THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION:
A SERIES OF ARTICLES
FROM THE NORTH
AMERICAN REVIEW**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649500840

The Christian Religion: A Series of Articles from the North American Review by Robert G. Ingersoll & Jeremiah S. Black & George P. Fisher

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Cover @ 2017

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ROBERT G. INGERSOLL & JEREMIAH S. BLACK & GEORGE P. FISHER

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BY
Lyons
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ONLY AUTHORIZED EDITION.

NEW-YORK:
PUBLISHED BY THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW,
No. 30 LAFAYETTE PLACE.
1882.

WAGNER OF
Prof. J. H. Thayer
March 20, 1902.

(177)

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1882.

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THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION.

I.

By ROBERT G. INGERSOLL.

In the presence of eternity the mountains are as transient as the clouds.

A PROFOUND change has taken place in the world of thought. The pews are trying to set themselves somewhat above the pulpit. The layman discusses theology with the minister, and smiles. Christians excuse themselves for belonging to the church, by denying a part of the creed. The idea is abroad that they who know the most of nature believe the least about theology. The sciences are regarded as infidels, and facts as scoffers. Thousands of most excellent people avoid churches, and, with few exceptions, only those attend prayer-meetings who wish to be alone. The pulpit is losing because the people are growing.

Of course it is still claimed that we are a Christian people, indebted to something called Christianity for all the progress we have made. There is still a vast difference of opinion as to what Christianity really is, although many warring sects have been discussing that question, with fire and sword, through centuries of creed and crime. Every new sect has been denounced at its birth as illegitimate, as a something born out of orthodox wedlock, and that should have been allowed to perish on the steps

where it was found. Of the relative merits of the various denominations, it is sufficient to say that each claims to be right. Among the evangelical churches there is a substantial agreement upon what they consider the fundamental truths of the gospel. These fundamental truths, as I understand them, are :

That there is a personal God, the creator of the material universe; that he made man of the dust, and woman from part of the man; that the man and woman were tempted by the devil; that they were turned out of the garden of Eden; that, about fifteen hundred years afterward, God's patience having been exhausted by the wickedness of mankind, he drowned his children with the exception of eight persons; that afterward he selected from their descendants Abraham, and through him the Jewish people; that he gave laws to these people, and tried to govern them in all things; that he made known his will in many ways; that he wrought a vast number of miracles; that he inspired men to write the Bible; that, in the fullness of time, it having been found impossible to reform mankind, this God came upon earth as a child born of the Virgin Mary; that he lived in Palestine; that he preached for about three years, going from place to place, occasionally raising the dead, curing the blind and the halt; that he was crucified—for the crime of blasphemy, as the Jews supposed, but that, as a matter of fact, he was offered as a sacrifice for the sins of all who might have faith in him; that he was raised from the dead and ascended into heaven, where he now is, making intercession for his followers; that he will forgive the sins of all who believe on him, and that those who do not believe will be consigned to the dungeons of eternal pain. These—it may be with the addition of the sacraments of Baptism and the Last Supper—constitute what is generally known as the Christian religion.

It is most cheerfully admitted that a vast number of people not only believe these things, but hold them in exceeding reverence, and imagine them to be of the utmost importance to mankind. They regard the Bible as the only light that God has given for the guidance of his children; that it is the one star in nature's sky—the foundation of all morality, of all law, of all order, and of all individual and national progress. They regard it as the only means we have for ascertaining the will of God, the origin of man, and the destiny of the soul.

It is needless to inquire into the causes that have led so many people to believe in the inspiration of the Scriptures. In my

opinion, they were and are mistaken, and the mistake has hindered, in countless ways, the civilization of man. The Bible has been the fortress and defense of nearly every crime. No civilized country could reenact its laws, and in many respects its moral code is abhorrent to every good and tender man. It is admitted that many of its precepts are pure, that many of its laws are wise and just, and that many of its statements are absolutely true.

Without desiring to hurt the feelings of anybody, I propose to give a few reasons for thinking that a few passages, at least, in the Old Testament are the product of a barbarous people.

In all civilized countries it is not only admitted, but it is passionately asserted, that slavery is and always was a hideous crime; that a war of conquest is simply murder; that polygamy is the enslavement of woman, the degradation of man, and the destruction of home; that nothing is more infamous than the slaughter of decrepit men, of helpless women, and of prattling babes; that captured maidens should not be given to soldiers; that wives should not be stoned to death on account of their religious opinions, and that the death penalty ought not to be inflicted for a violation of the Sabbath. We know that there was a time, in the history of almost every nation, when slavery, polygamy, and wars of extermination were regarded as divine institutions; when women were looked upon as beasts of burden, and when, among some people, it was considered the duty of the husband to murder the wife for differing with him on the subject of religion. Nations that entertain these views to-day are regarded as savage, and, probably, with the exception of the South Sea islanders, the Feejees, some citizens of Delaware, and a few tribes in Central Africa, no human beings can be found degraded enough to agree upon these subjects with the Jehovah of the ancient Jews. The only evidence we have, or can have, that a nation has ceased to be savage is the fact that it has abandoned these doctrines. To every one, except the theologian, it is perfectly easy to account for the mistakes, atrocities, and crimes of the past, by saying that civilization is a slow and painful growth; that the moral perceptions are cultivated through ages of tyranny, of want, of crime, and of heroism; that it requires centuries for man to put out the eyes of self and hold in lofty and in equal poise the scales of justice; that conscience is born of suffering; that mercy is the child of the imagination—of the power to put oneself in the sufferer's place, and that man advances only as he becomes acquainted with

his surroundings, with the mutual obligations of life, and learns to take advantage of the forces of nature.

But the believer in the inspiration of the Bible is compelled to declare that there was a time when slavery was right—when men could buy, and women could sell, their babes. He is compelled to insist that there was a time when polygamy was the highest form of virtue; when wars of extermination were waged with the sword of mercy; when religious toleration was a crime, and when death was the just penalty for having expressed an honest thought. He must maintain that Jehovah is just as bad now as he was four thousand years ago, or that he was just as good then as he is now, but that human conditions have so changed that slavery, polygamy, religious persecutions, and wars of conquest are now perfectly devilish. Once they were right—once they were commanded by God himself; now, they are prohibited. There has been such a change in the conditions of man that, at the present time, the devil is in favor of slavery, polygamy, religious persecution, and wars of conquest. That is to say, the devil entertains the same opinion to-day that Jehovah held four thousand years ago, but in the meantime Jehovah has remained exactly the same—changeless and incapable of change.

We find that other nations beside the Jews had similar laws and ideas; that they believed in and practiced slavery and polygamy, murdered women and children, and exterminated their neighbors to the extent of their power. It is not claimed that they received a revelation. It is admitted that they had no knowledge of the true God. And yet, by a strange coincidence, they practiced the same crimes, of their own motion, that the Jews did by the command of Jehovah. From this it would seem that man can do wrong without a special revelation.

It will hardly be claimed, at this day, that the passages in the Bible upholding slavery, polygamy, war, and religious persecution are evidences of the inspiration of that book. Suppose that there had been nothing in the Old Testament upholding these crimes, would any modern Christian suspect that it was not inspired, on account of the omission? Suppose that there had been nothing in the Old Testament but laws in favor of these crimes, would any intelligent Christian now contend that it was the work of the true God? If the devil had inspired a book, will some believer in the doctrine of inspiration tell us in what respect, on the subjects of slavery, polygamy, war, and

liberty, it would have differed from some parts of the Old Testament! Suppose that we should now discover a Hindu book of equal antiquity with the Old Testament, containing a defense of slavery, polygamy, wars of extermination, and religious persecution, would we regard it as evidence that the writers were inspired by an infinitely wise and merciful God? As most other nations at that time practiced these crimes, and as the Jews would have practiced them all, even if left to themselves, one can hardly see the necessity of any inspired commands upon these subjects. Is there a believer in the Bible who does not wish that God, amid the thunders and lightnings of Sinai, had distinctly said to Moses that man should not own his fellow-man; that women should not sell their babes; that men should be allowed to think and investigate for themselves, and that the sword should never be unsheathed to shed the blood of honest men? Is there a believer, in the world, who would not be delighted to find that every one of these infamous passages are interpolations, and that the skirts of God were never reddened by the blood of maiden, wife, or babe? Is there a believer who does not regret that God commanded a husband to stone his wife to death for suggesting the worship of the sun or moon? Surely, the light of experience is enough to tell us that slavery is wrong, that polygamy is infamous, and that murder is not a virtue. No one will now contend that it was worth God's while to impart the information to Moses, or to Joshua, or to anybody else, that the Jewish people might purchase slaves of the heathen, or that it was their duty to exterminate the natives of the Holy Land. The deists have contended that the Old Testament is too cruel and barbarous to be the work of a wise and loving God. To this, the theologians have replied, that nature is just as cruel; that the earthquake, the volcano, the pestilence and storm, are just as savage as the Jewish God; and to my mind this is a perfect answer.

Suppose that we knew that after "inspired" men had finished the Bible, the devil got possession of it, and wrote a few passages; what part of the sacred Scriptures would Christians now pick out as being probably his work? Which of the following passages would naturally be selected as having been written by the devil—"Love thy neighbor as thyself," or, "Kill all the males among the little ones, and kill every woman; but all the women children keep alive for yourselves"?